

# The Oracle Times

By Nick Vollmer

He closed his eyes as the hot water poured over him, feeling the weariness that always set in when a hard night of work was almost done. His muscles ached, his eyes burned, and his sinuses were stuffed up. *Damn sinuses*, he thought, *almost could've enjoyed it if not for them*. He breathed in some steam trying to clear them. It had been a good night though overall, gone off without a hitch. Most nights had at least one hitch.

He reached down and picked up the shampoo. After a lingering glance at the label, he poured some into his hand then rubbed it onto his bald scalp. *Getting old*, he thought. He barely had to shave away anything anymore. He used the excess to wash his body, then rinsed. He spared a look at the conditioner, but decided against it. As dirty as he felt, he had to get going. Reaching forward, he turned off the shower.

Pulling the curtain aside, he climbed out, stepped over the body of the dead little girl, and grabbed a towel. It was pink with a name embroidered at the bottom in cute cursive letters. He dried himself thoroughly, then threw the towel into the bathtub. Still feeling gross, he took his briefcase from the corner of the room and opened it on the countertop.

First, he took out a pair of socks, stripping the wet ones off his feet and replacing them with the dry without ever touching the tile floor. He threw the wet socks into the bathtub alongside the towel, then pulled out his clothes. A nylon, long-sleeved shirt, nylon slacks, and a pair of nylon boxers. *No fibers there*, he thought almost sarcastically. He put them on and examined himself in the mirror. He looked like a businessman. Perfectly normal, highly professional. He had been proud of that look once.

Carefully, he removed his bloody latex gloves from the sink and tossed them into the bathtub. Picking up a pink toothbrush, he brushed his teeth, then threw that into the tub as well. Still not clean enough. Finally, he double checked that all of his tools were clean and securely back in the briefcase, then he closed it and set it back in the corner.

At last he turned to the little girl, kneeling beside her. She had been cute before he had raped her and slit her throat. Six years old, long brown hair tied up in a ponytail with a bow. Big, innocent brown eyes. One of those smiles that made adults melt and

give into her every demand. Now she lay sprawled on the tile floor, naked, bruised, cut and bleeding. Her skin had begun to lose its color, and her eyes were open, gazing lifelessly up at him. Her hands had been tied together behind her back, twisting her body awkwardly at the hips. A single piece of duct tape sealed her smile.

“Come here, sweetheart,” he said softly, then lifted her from the floor. A shiver ran through his body at the damp, clammy feel of her skin. He was careful to avoid her neck, which still dripped blood from the gruesome slit across her throat. He stepped forward, then angled his arms downward and let her tumble into the tub, limbs flailing. He felt a pang of guilt upon seeing her face bash into the drain with a bright spray of blood, but he quickly suppressed it. There would be plenty of time for guilt later; right now he had a job to finish.

He turned away from the tub and grabbed another item from the corner of the bathroom. This one was a canister of gasoline. After removing the cap, he emptied it into the bathtub, being careful to ensure that anything his skin had touched was fully drenched and spiraling some down the drain. The smell tickled in his nose, drowning out the blood and steam which had filled it before.

In his pants pocket, he found his matchbook and pulled it out. But his hands faltered before he lit the match and finished the job. He felt the sick, heavy feeling begin to seep in again. It had been coming faster lately, and he figured that the adrenaline was wearing off sooner after each massacre. They weren't as shocking to his mind and body as they once were. His thoughts drifted to the little girl as he looked at her corpse in the tub; how peaceful she had looked in her bed before he grabbed her. How pleasantly unaware of the world's nightmares she was. He had always wanted a daughter...

Another future he had stolen. One of many. He was the only sexual experience she would ever have, and her eyes had been filled with uncomprehending terror throughout it. For a moment he wondered how well she had been able to breathe- he had been careless with the duct tape. He contemplated on how much pain there must be in suffocating as you're raped. She had never had the chance to even think of boys yet, much less sex. Tears began to form in his eyes and snapped him from his reverie. It was time to go.

He lit the match and tossed it into the tub, then turned from the inferno, gathered up his things, and left the room. He walked out the front door, got into his car, and drove away, leaving a family of four brutally murdered in his wake.

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The computer screen blurred in front of his eyes. For a moment he thought it was moving, then realized that he was merely falling out of his chair. He hit the floor with a crash and thought it was ironic when he bruised his forehead on the edge of a beer can. For a moment he laid there, gazing at the mess of cans, moldy dishes, pizza boxes, and vomit that covered his apartment floor. The carpet felt rough and crusty on his cheek, but he didn't especially feel like moving. Something smelled horrible. He watched a roach crawl past, only a few inches from his nose.

His eyes blurred again and he began to sob. It came in a rush, coursing through his body like a wave. Grief, frustration, guilt. He wasn't exactly sure which, and he didn't care. He let it all out; a grown man bawling like a baby.

When the tears dried, he climbed shakily to his feet. His eyes slid once more to the computer screen. The words "Six Year Old Raped, Family Murdered" glared in bold letters above a blinking cursor. He plopped back into the chair and jammed his finger onto the backspace key until the letters were gone. Then he leaned forward and held his head in his hands. *Gotta write it*, he thought, *just fucking write it and get it done*. He looked back up at the screen, felt his head swim again, and decided he needed another beer.

He stumbled across the room, kicking the mess out of the way as he went, and headed into the kitchen. When he opened the fridge, a foul smell drifted out. There was little left by way of food, but there was plenty of beer. Always plenty of beer. He grabbed a can then made his way back to the desk.

Downing half the beer, he set to work on his story once more.

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He didn't know how long the phone had been ringing before he finally woke up. His head pounded. His body ached.

"Hello?"

"Your story was crap."

“So?”

“Late too. Henry nearly didn’t make it.”

John didn’t reply. He wasn’t expected to.

“Are you coming in today?”

He looked over at the clock. It took his eyes a few minutes to focus. Almost noon. “Ya need me?”

“I don’t know, John, do we?”

“Give me an hour.”

The man on the other end hung up. John sat up and groaned. Before he lost the will, he climbed out of bed and weaved into the bathroom. He pulled back his shower curtain and looked at the blackening mildew. *I’m quitting*, he thought, *I’m done with this shit*. He turned on the hot water and climbed in, adjusting the cold only after he was almost being burned. He felt sick.

*I’ll walk right in there and tell him. What’s he gonna do? Tell me no? His sinuses were stuffed up again, and he tried unsuccessfully to clear them. I’ll go work for the telegram. Write the old way again.*

He picked up the bottle of shampoo but found it to be empty. He filled it with water and used the little soap it provided to clean himself. Then he sat down on the mildewing shower floor and let the hot water run over him. *I need a beer*, he thought.

\* \* \*

“Mr. Erebus?”

“It’s about time you showed up. You see your story?”

“Yeah.”

“Not much of it was yours.”

“I know.”

“C’mere John. Have a seat.”

John walked into the dark office, taking a seat in front of Erebus’ desk. *Quit*, he told himself, *he can’t stop you*, but suddenly it seemed much harder to do than it had in the car on the way to the office. Erebus had always had a way of doing that to him. Disarming him with a smile, convincing him that he wanted to do things he didn’t.

Poisoning him with promises of success. Bribing him with raises. It had been his idea to start the crimes in the first place.

“What’s going on, John?” Erebus asked as if they were old friends, “you’re losing your touch.”

“I can’t do it anymore,” John said honestly, “It’s killing me.”

“The writing or the murders?”

“The writing because of the murders.”

“You’re the best known writer in the city, you can’t stop now. You’re the highest paid too.”

“I know, but...”

“John,” Erebus leaned forwards, “guys like you don’t come along everyday. We’ve turned the Oracle into the best paper in town. Always the first to a story, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you really want to give that all up?” Erebus said it as though John were a six year old turning down a trip to Disney World. “You’ll never find this kind of pay again. Not as a writer.”

John closed his eyes and rubbed between them with his thumb and index finger. His hangover was still making his brain feel like pulp.

“I just don’t think it’s worth it anymore, Bob.”

He half expected to be offered another raise. Instead, Erebus sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Someone has to do it, y’know,” he said after a pause, “you thought about that?”

“What about Henry?”

Erebus snorted, “Henry? He’d love it, but he’s careless and you know it. He’s good at patching up stories and being first to your crime scenes, but he ain’t a killer. He’s lacking the brains.”

“You haven’t tried to bring anyone else in?”

“Too much risk. You’re my main man, John.”

“I’m done, Bob.”

Erebus sat back in his chair again, his thick eyebrows furrowing in the way John had come to recognize as his thinking expression. At length, he spoke once more:

“I need you to do one more for me. Something everyone will remember for years to come. Your final award winning article for the Oracle Times.”

“And then?”

“And then you pass your duties on to someone else. Teach them what you do, how you do it. You can start before the crime if you want, I don’t care. You’re the best, John, and I need someone who can do as good a job as you’ve done this past year.”

John thought for a moment, then shook his head. “I can’t. I don’t want to anymore.”

“I’ll send you a paycheck for the rest of your life. No work required.”

Their eyes met as John decided if Erebus was telling the truth.

“Alright,” he said, and shook his boss’s hand.

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“Like it?” Henry walked into his office as John read the story of the previous night’s murder.

John shrugged, “it’s okay.”

“Just okay? C’mon, John, your article was practically a confession! I rewrote the whole damn thing and still made it first online. You should be kissing my feet!” Henry plopped down in one of the chairs in front of the desk.

“You mind? I’m trying to read.”

Henry shook his head and leaned towards John, lowering his voice. “Bob told me what you agreed to do.”

John ignored him, focusing on the article with his name on it that was almost entirely Henry’s work. It had appeared in that morning’s paper, and online before that, insuring that the Oracle was the first news company to report on the event.

“I’m worried about you, man,” Henry continued, unfazed, “you’re getting careless.” He waited a moment for a reply, but got nothing. “I mean, why did you burn the stuff with the girl? That’s just asking for the police to find something if you ask me.”

“Go back to work, Henry.”

“They got there soon enough to know that she was raped. You wanted them to, didn’t you?”

John pushed himself away from his desk and stood up. Without a word, he walked out of the office and made his way to the coffee machine.

Henry stood up and followed. "I'm just trying to watch out for you," he said, starting to sound frustrated, "you're making it hard lately."

Finally, John turned to face him. "You think this is easy?" he snapped, then he lowered his voice to a whisper so that no one else would hear him, "I quit this morning 'cause it's driving me crazy. I have to do one more, then I'm out of here."

"Just know that I'm here if you need me," Henry's eyes showed his sincerity, "Like the old days, alright?"

"Thanks." John pushed past his fellow reporter and walked back into his office.

\* \* \*

*Angela Kalira Diavolo.* John ran the name through his mind. Her resume sat on the top of a stack of papers on his desk, mostly made up of other resumes, but below them were pictures and descriptions of families he had scoped out. His TV blared nearby.

He finished off his beer and tried unsuccessfully to toss the bottle into the overflowing trash can.

He had seen her at work before; a pretty, new reporter trying to work her way up through the ranks. Failing miserably. She tended to glance at him out of the corner of her eye whenever he was nearby, but she had only worked up the guts to talk to him once.

"You're John Mattox?" she had asked.

"Yeah."

"I'm Angie Diavolo. It's a pleasure to meet you." She held out her hand and he shook it. "I hear you're the highest paid reporter in the city." Even then he could tell how desperate she was for a big break.

He had shrugged.

Angie shifted uncomfortably, "Well, I'm working in your department if you ever need me. I do the smaller stuff right now, but I'm hoping to be as good as you someday."

"I'll keep that in mind."

She had nodded to herself, adjusted her glasses, then said, "I'm sorry to keep you from your work. It was nice meeting you." And they had gone back to work. He

recalled thinking that he hadn't always been a jerk, and that he would have to work on it. He hadn't gotten very far since.

*What do you think you can bring to the Oracle Times?* The resume asked.

*I'm willing to do whatever it takes to get a good story, Angie had written, and I'm not afraid to talk to anyone, no matter who they are, to get the perfect angle on an article.*

John set the resume down, satisfied. She would do. He closed his eyes and rubbed them with a sigh. She would do.

\* \* \*

“Angie?”

She looked up from her computer screen, startled. “Mr. Mattox.... Um, hi.”

He held out his hand, “Call me John.”

“John then,” she replied shaking it, “sorry, you scared me.”

Her green eyes jumped back to the screen and she quickly typed the end of her line. Then, with a frustrated grunt and subtle shake of her head, she hit backspace and erased it.

“Working on an article?” he asked. He was surprised at how nervous he was- he could kill entire families, but he still turned into a wreck when he tried to talk to a woman.

“Yeah,” she said, clicking ‘save’. “Erebus assigned it to me this morning. Some guy was mugged last night, lost a lot of money. It’s nothing like what you do, but a paycheck’s a paycheck.”

“I, um, just wanted to apologize for how cold I was to you when we met. I’m normally not like that.”

She raised her eyebrows skeptically as if to say *that’s not what I’ve heard*, but all she said was, “don’t worry about it.”

John shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other as his fingers toyed with a coin in his pocket. “Can I make it up to you somehow? Like, um, lunch or something?”

She leaned back in her chair. “You mean to tell me that the great John Mattox wants to take me out?”

He didn’t know what to say, but she didn’t pause for long.

“Yeah,” she laughed, “I’ll go.”

“Great,” he clapped his hands together awkwardly, “meet you in the lobby at noon?”

“Sure,” she laughed again, shaking her head, “I’ll be there.” Then she went back to work on her story as John headed for his office.

*Guess I could have just met her at her desk*, he thought, feeling stupid. He opened his door and stepped inside. A note from Erebus was sitting on his keyboard. He walked over and picked it up.

*“Great choice, John,”* it read, *“She’s almost as broke as you were. Let me know your plans for the story as soon as you know. –Bob”*

*He’s planning to turn me in*, John thought suddenly, even though the note was nothing unusual. He had worried about it before, but it suddenly seemed far more viable. What better story was there than one about a reporter who took his job too far and an unsuspecting boss who uncovered the plot?

He sat down in his big leather chair and picked up his briefcase from beside the desk. Popping it open, he pulled out his notes on the family he had decided would be the target of his final crime.

Family of five. Two happy parents, two girls, nine and five, and a little three year old brother. Big house, two cats, and a pool. All in a nice, supposedly safe neighborhood. He had been saving them for something like this, they were an ideal American family and he would destroy them. News that challenged the average family’s world view always sold well. People had to know what was going on, especially if it could happen to them.

He flipped through his notes and picked another family. He would tell Erebus they were the target. Send the police to the wrong house. By the time they arrived at the real crime scene, he would be gone, and there would be no evidence to condemn him. The police would be suspicious, maybe even interrogate him, but it would be his last crime, and as long as he was careful, they could watch him all they wanted after that and find nothing. As long as the article was good, Erebus would have no choice but to uphold his end of the bargain.

*Or fire me*, John thought. It made him smile a little, then he got to work.

He felt a little guilty at first, but as he began to outline his plan, the guilt subsided. He always got excited during planning- there was something very fulfilling in outsmarting your fellow man, and being the murderer that always eluded the police. Something thrilling. This plan would put him down in history, right there alongside Henry Lee Lucas and Jack the Ripper. This plan would tie all of his murders together and send a wave of terror through the entire area.

This plan would go further than he ever had before.

\* \* \*

“So,” Angie leaned close across the small, candlelit table, “how *do* you always find the best stories first?”

John smiled slightly, “you sure you want to know? It’s kind of top secret.” Inside he fought with himself over whether to go through with it or not. He liked the way her eyes sparkled through her glasses when she talked. He liked her smile. He hadn’t laughed with anyone this much since the whole thing began.

“Some of the other reporters think you sit around and listen to the police radio all day,” she said, “but I tried that and the best I got in a week was a fire.” She took a sip of her margarita. The waitress came and took her plate.

“Fire’s not bad.”

“Compared to a rape and quadruple homicide? C’mon.”

He shrugged, conceding the point. For a second, he thought he was about to tell her everything, then he picked up his fork and took another bite of chicken.

“Y’know, you’re not nearly as bad as everyone makes you out to be,” she said after a moment, “I asked about you when I was hired- they all said you were a jerk.”

“I am most of the time.” He felt like he had wings. It had been a long time since someone had shown so much interest, and even longer since he had talked like this. He wished he didn’t have to ruin it.

“So why the nice streak?”

“I’m thinking about retiring early. I thought I’d share my secret with someone.”

“And you picked me?”

“I thought you were... cute... and you seem like you could use the help.”

She glared at him, “Hey!”

“Really, though,” he said, getting solemn, “I’m hoping to teach you.”

“So how *do* you do it?” Her anger subsided quickly. She leaned in closer.

He took a deep breath and prodded some vegetables with his fork. *Gotta do it*, he thought. He worried about what would happen if she rejected the idea outright. He might have to kill her. He looked up, meeting her gaze, seeing himself reflected in her glasses. “Can you meet me in the park at eleven tonight?”

“Why?”

“We’re going to get your career started right.”

She looked at him skeptically. “You’re not trying to seduce me or something, right? Trying to get a little action out of the new girl?”

“Am I succeeding?” he joked, but she didn’t laugh.

“We’ll see,” she said. Then, “Really, though, you’ll help me?”

“Promise.”

“Then I guess its date two.”

\* \* \*

*I’m a sick person.* He sat in front of a mirror, fully dressed for a pleasant evening in the park. *I’m completely fucking disgusting.*

The planning phase was finished and what he was getting ready to do was finally sinking in. That poor family. *I’m a monster.* He thought back to his first crimes, done with Erebus standing nearby, watching, making sure everything went as planned. Congratulating him on a job well done. He had been just like Angie back then- young, eager, broke, and depressed. Feeling as though his big break would never come.

He desperately wanted another beer, but he had to meet her in half an hour. It was his only way out. If he didn’t give Erebus a replacement, the man would make his life miserable. *She doesn’t deserve this though*, he thought.

*Neither did you.*

He looked around his disaster of an apartment at all the nice things he owned, buried beneath his trash, his waste, his puke. Erebus had been right about one thing- he certainly had plenty of money. And fame. He gave the people what they wanted: tons of bad news. He could get a job at any newspaper in the country. Always first, always worst. What beat that?

He punched the mirror and ground his fist into the shards until it bled, slamming the closet door it was mounted to. What really got to him was the sense of power. He could control life and death. He could be God to a few terrified people before he took their lives. For about half an hour, he could be the boss.

*No*, he pulled a shard of glass out of the mirror and looked at his reflection through the blood that slid slowly down it. *It's not the power, it's the pride. Before the guilt, I'm fucking proud.*

And why not? He was well on his way to becoming the most successful serial killer of all time, and no one suspected a thing. That said something about his intelligence, didn't it? That he was smart enough to lead?

*But I'm weak.* He should have said no to Erebus. He should have already been out. Instead he was about to corrupt the girl he was falling for, and instead of feeling bad about that, he found himself wanting to tell her. She would understand. She would share his pride. Right?

He kissed the shard, tasting the metallic tang of his blood. *To the end*, he thought. Tossing it aside, he left his apartment, licking the blood from his lips.

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"Alright," he told her, stopping in the middle of a footpath, "just how far *will* you go to be the best?"

She looked up at him and he could see the stars reflected in her eyes. She looked amazing with contacts. "Fuck the best," she said, smiling, "I just need enough money to pay rent." Behind her words though, he could see the spark of excitement. The same spark his eyes had surely held when Erebus brought him to the same park.

"Would you kill for it?"

"Um, no..."

"What if there was no chance you would be caught?"

Their evening in the park had gone perfectly. He couldn't remember a more romantic night. She was so much like him. They had talked for hours, just sitting by the fountain. She had held his hand.

"You're joking, right?" she smiled as if to laugh, but her expression was serious.

He stepped over to the side of the path, bent down, and used both hands to pick up a hefty rock. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before he turned back to her. “See that man?” he nodded towards a bench where a homeless man was sleeping, “he’s dying of syphilis. I’ve been watching him. He can barely stand due to internal damage. He’s in constant pain. Wants to die, but no one can help him.”

Angie’s eyes narrowed skeptically, but she looked over at the man. He groaned in his sleep as if to confirm John’s story. She could see the patchiness of his hair even in the moonlight.

“If you use this rock to bash the back of his head in, you could throw it in the pond and no one would ever know.” He held it out to her. “You’d be his savior.”

She stared at the rock in silence for a solid minute. Then she looked up at him, her eyes narrowed.

“You kill people for stories?”

“Everyone loves bad news,” he whispered gently, “everyone needs it to see just how good their own lives are. Who could possibly complain about life when confronted with the possibility of their death?”

The speech was Erebus’, but it had worked on him, and he could see it working on Angie now. Suddenly he hated himself. He despised Erebus for getting him involved in all of this, and now he was doing the same thing.

“You’ve always wanted a murder story,” he said, “That poor bastard wants to die.”

Angie reached up and put a hand on the rock and suddenly everything changed. *No!* his mind screamed, but he held his tongue. Why was it working? It had always been in the plan, but he realized suddenly that he had never expected it to work. She was supposed to be scared. She was supposed to run. That’s what normal people did, right?

She took the rock and turned to face the man. Then she looked back at John. “So I just put him out of his misery and my career begins?”

John stood still, dumbfounded.

“It’s what you brought me out here for, isn’t it? To kill him?”

*You're okay with that?* he wanted to ask, but no words came out. He kept expecting her to throw the rock at him instead, to scream at him about how insane he was.

“How many have *you* killed?” she asked, almost seductively. It was as if she was challenging him: *I can beat you*, her eyes taunted.

She walked slowly over to the man and stood above him. John followed.

“To get back at mankind...” she whispered under her breath, so quietly that John could barely make it out. Then she raised the rock up over her head.

*Please don't do it*, John panicked, *I'll quit, I'll be stronger just please-*

She looked over at him. He nodded.

The rock came down hard.

\* \* \*

John didn't sleep that night. After the rabid sex with Angie, he lay awake for hours, watching her. She tossed and turned; probably a result of the alcohol, but he kept picturing her killing the man in the park. So calm. As if she had always wanted to do it but could never work up the courage. The break down had come- that had reassured him a little, but he couldn't help but wonder. She had been almost vicious in bed; passionate and controlling.

*After tomorrow*, he thought, *after tomorrow everything will work out. I'll find a way. We'll both escape it.*

\* \* \*

“John, you have your plan yet?” Erebus always got right to the point.

“Yeah, the target I told you about a few weeks ago. Family of four. The Turners. I'm going in tomorrow night.”

“And the crime?”

“It's a surprise. You'll like it I promise. Get ready for a sales record.” John hung up the phone, feeling annoyed, then opened the door to his apartment.

*Bastard*, he thought. Then, as he trudged through his filth, he had an idea.

\* \* \*

“Hello?” as usual, Erebus sounded half asleep. Good.

“I’m here,” John said, his latex gloves already covering his hands, “I’ll call Henry in a couple of hours.”

“Good luck. Last one.”

Flipping the phone closed, John leaned back in the seat of his car. Then he closed his eyes and took some deep breaths. *Sure about this?* he asked himself. His heart beat hard in his chest, beginning to pump him full of adrenaline. *Doesn’t matter. It’s the only way to save her.*

He turned the key in the ignition and pulled out of the apartment parking lot, focusing his mind back on his plan. About thirty minutes later, he turned into a suburb. Elaborate, two story houses lined either side of the street, towering over carefully manicured lawns. Everything was quiet, and only a few lights remained on. Typical suburban America at two a.m.

When his target house came into view, he pulled to the side of the road and parked. Climbing out, he checked himself carefully, making sure there was nothing on him that could fall off as he worked. Then he stepped to the back of the car, popped the trunk and pulled out his briefcase.

He walked quietly up the street, passing several dark houses, then up the driveway of his target home. When he reached the front door, he knelt down and picked up one side of the welcome mat, taking the key that was hidden beneath. He stood and held the key out as if to put it in the door.

*Last one*, he told himself, *after this it’s all over*. He felt the adrenaline beginning to build, a pounding in his veins. This one wasn’t like the others he had done. This one was worse. *Legendary*, he thought.

He took a deep breath, then slid in the key and opened the door. Silent. Beautiful. Without looking back, he stepped into the house.

Cool air hit his face as he passed through the doorway. It smelled fresh, clean. Nothing like his apartment. Carefully, he closed the door.

“Reeow.” A cat looked at him from a few feet away, its eyes glowing eerily in the darkness. *I’ll be back for you*, he thought. Animals were too likely to make noise when he killed them first. He reached out to pet it as he walked softly past, but the animal dodged out of his reach and ran around a corner.

Like a wraith he walked through the kitchen, briefcase in hand, passing the stairs that led up to the kids' room. He stepped into a hallway, pitch dark except for a skylight, moonlight barely illuminating everything beneath it. There was a mirror there, but he walked by without a glance.

When he stood outside the master bedroom door, he set his briefcase on the floor and knelt to flip it open. Even in the dark he easily found what he was looking for: two kitchen knives, generic in every way, sharpened into razor blades. He tucked them both into his belt, covering them with his shirt. Next, he pulled out a bottle of chemicals and two handkerchiefs. He poured some of the liquid onto them, then tucked a corner of one into his pocket and held the other in his hand. Finally, he strapped a role of duct tape to his belt. Then he closed his eyes and took a deep, nervous breath. Standing, he reached out and pushed the door open.

The bed was the first thing he saw, pressed up against a wall so that it was perpendicular to the doorway. Facing him was a young woman, her eyes closed in the peace of sleep, snoring softly. A small bead of drool dotted the pillow beneath her lips, visible in the light of her bedside clock. He had never met her.

John stepped in, still walking carefully, but suddenly taken with a mad urge to kiss those lips. He would do so later; for now, he suppressed it. Angie floated into his mind, still asleep beside him when he woke up in the morning. Her shower had been cleaner than his.

As he moved further into the room, John could make out the shape of the woman's husband, a big man, turned away from her, his knees curled almost to his chest. *Erebus*. John had to take another deep breath to calm his nerves. Here was the man who had taught him everything. Here was the bastard who had ruined his life. Here was the demon who was trying to take Angie as well. John wondered if Erebus' wife knew what her husband had done.

*Last one*, John told himself. He watched them for a few seconds longer, then he walked stealthily over to Erebus's side of the bed. Squatting beside him, John held out one handkerchief and draped it softly over his boss' face. Then he turned and quietly did the same thing to the wife with the second. After a few minutes that felt like hours, he shook Erebus gently. Nothing.

Removing the handkerchiefs and tucking them into his pockets, he grabbed Erebus under the arms and pulled him slowly out of bed. His brain hummed with adrenaline, and his heart beat hard. Most of the time, he killed the man of the house immediately- they were too dangerous. He couldn't be sure he could overpower them. Grabbing Erebus was worse; he felt like he held the devil himself in his arms, and the snake was likely to bite. He had to act fast.

The woman murmured a few words as Erebus' feet hit the floor, but she didn't wake up. The chemicals were working.

Moving as stealthily as he could while carrying a 250 pound man, John dragged Erebus from the room, down the hall, and into the kitchen. There, he laid him out on the kitchen table. He pulled the duct tape from his belt and used it to strap Erebus down, circling his body several times and paying special attention to his arms and legs. After he was certain the man wouldn't be able to move, he covered his mouth with a piece of duct tape as well.

Then he stood in the dark, looking down at the man he had once trusted, the fingers of his right hand toying with one of the knives in his belt. *I can't do this*, he thought. Normally he acted fast, killing the man before doing anything else. He could convince himself that he was above the women, the children. He could control them. They were insignificant, they begged. He sent them to a better place.

This was Erebus. The man he had looked up to, envied.

His thoughts shifted suddenly to Angie, how peaceful she had looked still asleep in the morning when he climbed out of her bed. How beautiful as she had climbed into the shower with him, steam swirling around her, kissing him, pressing her slender naked body against his.

He pulled a knife from his belt, took one of Erebus' hands in his own, and began to cut off the tip of the index finger at the last knuckle. His boss' eyes snapped open, a yell trying to escape his mouth. His head twisted to look at John who did nothing to conceal his identity, but merely avoided looking Erebus in the face. He pressed the knife in harder. The tip of the finger popped off in a spray of blood.

Erebus tried to yell again, jerking at his bonds. John had done well. He was helpless.

*Welcome to your world*, John tried to say, but the words wouldn't come out. His lips quivered. He turned away from Erebus and walked back towards the master bedroom.

The wife was still sleeping, completely oblivious to all that had happened. John stood in the doorway, gazing at her. She was Erebus', just as Angie was his. Erebus had never brought her to the office. John knew he went home late every night. In his mind, John pictured Erebus in bed with her, using her until he was satisfied, turning away to sleep without a kiss.

Stepping softly up to the bed, he laid down beside her in Erebus' place, so close that he could smell the sweet scent of her hair. He reached out and gently caressed her arm, sliding his hand down under the blankets to her stomach, her hips, her leg. She groaned and turned towards him, her eyes still closed.

"Bob, we already..." her eyes opened a little and she saw him.

John clapped a hand to her mouth as she began to scream. "Shhhh," he whispered, "your husband's dead. I'll kill your children if you make another sound."

She went silent, beginning to cry.

John leaned in and kissed her lips, long and full. She tried to turn away from him, but he grabbed her chin and yanked it back into place, kissing her some more, gaining confidence as he went.

His thoughts returned to Angie, lying there in bed beside him, both of them drenched with sweat.

"I haven't done that in years," she had said, breathless.

"Why not?" he had asked, "you're gorgeous."

"Don't worry about it," she leaned in and kissed him deep, catching his lower lip in her teeth.

"No really," he said, pushing her gently away, "I want to know. Why not?"

She sighed and shifted her gaze away from his eyes. "I did it too much in high school," she said, "kind of chose to stop for awhile."

He reached a hand down between the woman's legs, grabbing her. Then he pushed the blankets away and pulled her panties down to her knees. She tried to kick him, but he shoved the leg away and grabbed her violently by the throat.

“Struggle and your kids die.”

She gave up, closing her eyes as tears poured down her cheeks.

“So why all the sex in High School?” he had asked as they dried themselves off the next morning.

“Honestly?” Angie replied.

He shrugged, “whatever.”

“My dad molested me when I was five.”

He had paused a moment. “And that made you...”

“I felt disgusting for pretty much my whole life. I had no friends. In High School I discovered that the boys wanted my body. I figured, what the hell, give it to them. I had already been taken.”

He unfastened his pants and plunged into the woman with a moan. She sobbed harder, barely able to breathe. Her entire body convulsed. He had intended to do this in front of Erebus, to show him his defeat, but he couldn't do that to her. He cared too much.

When it was done, he relaxed on top of her and kissed her on the forehead. “Goodnight,” he whispered, then pulled the second knife from his belt and slit her throat.

He stood up and cleaned himself off, refastening his pants. Then he dipped one gloved hand into the woman's spreading blood and walked over to a wall.

*Hayden*, he wrote, the surname of his first victim. Then, below it, *me*.

He wrote two more names, then gathered the wife into his arms and walked back out to the kitchen. He heard Erebus trying to scream through his bonds, but he avoided looking at his face. He dumped the woman's dripping, lifeless body on top of her husband, then turned towards the stairs.

“Not the kids! Please not the kids!” John thought he could make out the words behind Erebus' delirious grunting. He paused, then ignored them and climbed up the steps.

\* \* \*

John allowed himself to look at Erebus' face for the first time. The man's entire family lay on top of him, their blood leaking down to soak his clothes. Around the house,

over twenty names were scrawled in blood on the walls. Erebus's face was soaked with tears and sweat, and his eyes held little life.

"It'll make a great story, won't it Bob?" John whispered, his voice trembling, "My last award winning article for the Oracle Times." He stepped forward and sealed Erebus' mouth and nose with one hand. Erebus didn't struggle as his life was taken from him.

\* \* \*

"John, what happened?" Henry's voice was filled with concern, "I rushed to the house you said was your target when you didn't call, but there was no one there."

John closed his eyes, choking back tears. "Erebus turned me in," he said, "I had to deal with it."

"Where are you now?"

John looked behind him at the front of Angie's house, still shrouded in the half darkness of early morning. He didn't know why he had come, but he was sure that police would be waiting for him at his apartment, hoping to chat with him due to Erebus' tip. Here just felt right.

"Don't worry about it," he said, and hung up the phone. Then he laid back in her grass and let himself cry. He didn't know if the police would find him. He didn't know if they had any evidence to condemn him. He had cleaned up Erebus's with ammonia. Taken his time. But he felt hollow.

He heard a door open behind him. Then a voice. "John?"

He held back his tears, but he couldn't bring himself to answer.

"John..." she walked over and stood above him, fully dressed. She looked at him for a moment, appearing upside down from his angle, then asked, "What happened?"

"Can you come walk with me?" he asked slowly. His voice cracked and shook a little, but he tried to hide it.

"Sure," she replied, "let me put on my shoes." She was deeply concerned about him, he could see it in her eyes. Those beautiful eyes. *I did it for you, you know*, he thought.

Angie returned and helped him to his feet. She tried to talk to him, but his eyes stopped her and they began to walk.

They walked together in silence for a while, John's arms crossed on his chest, his eyes on the ground. The horizon began to grow a faint orange, and everything turned the hazy gray of dawn. They reached a bridge over the river, and finally John spoke.

"Run away with me," he said.

She stopped walking and put a hand on each of his shoulders, just close enough to his neck to be intimate. "What happened, John?"

"It was the last one..." he said it quietly. "Erebus... I had to. For you."

"Will they find you?"

"Probably," he turned away from her and looked out over the glistening water.

She stepped up beside him and rubbed his back with one hand. "So, where are we going?"

He shrugged, "Away."

"And money?"

Her hand on his back comforted him, helped him force back his grief.

"I've prepared for this," he said, "I'll take care of you." He turned back to her and wrapped her in his arms. He had wanted this for so long. A family like all he had destroyed. He hadn't thought it was possible. The tears returned to his eyes.

Angie was silent, then she looked up at him. "I can't John," she said. "My career is just beginning."

He looked down at her. "I fixed it," he said, "you'll never have to kill."

Slowly, she shook her head. "I'm doing a story John. One that will surpass anything you've ever done." She took a step away from him, her hands returning to her pockets. "One that will make us both famous."

His eyes narrowed, confused.

"One about a serial killer, gone missing after the crime that revealed him." She pulled her hands from her pockets, each grasping a small steak knife. Still looking directly into his eyes, she stabbed them into each of his lungs. He didn't try to stop her.

John's body convulsed, his eyes going wide. Through the pain, he began to feel like he was drowning.

"Erebus made me an offer I can't refuse. I'm sorry John."

He tried to tell her Erebus was dead, but all he could do was gurgle. She slit his throat and shoved him hard, sending him careening over the railing. The tears fell openly down her face.

“Everybody loves bad news,” he heard her say as he fell.

He hit the water and began to sink, the cold seeming to cut straight to his bones. *She’s right*, he thought as blackness overcame him, *people will love this*.